

GAMES

FAQ

Q I've heard there are plans to overhaul the age ratings on games. Can you tell me why this is?

A Currently there's a two-tier system of certification for games on sale in the UK. A voluntary system called Pan European Game Information (PEGI) is abided to by all major games publishers and gives titles an age-suitability rating. This is adhered to by high-street retailers in the UK, who have policies against selling unsuitable titles to children.

Games that contain 'gross violent content' must be put before the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC), which also certifies all cinema releases in the UK. This body decides if the game needs to be given a legally binding rating. A few games receive the familiar 12, 15 and 18 ratings, and so cannot legally be bought by younger minors.

The upcoming government review may suggest a single, legally binding ratings system for all releases. It's too early to say how this would be administered and financed, but we feel a single system could be clearer for parents, and could potentially lessen the counterproductive hype surrounding titles that currently get 18 ratings. However, we would oppose any censorship of games intended for adults.

Seth Barton

Video and games expert

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EIDOS Conflict: Denied Ops

★★★★

£25 inc VAT

From www.play.com

Buddy movies are the template of choice for the current crop of action games. Double-teams of gruff, aggressive men are popping up all over the place. This latest instalment in the popular Conflict series takes the idea one step further.

Eschewing the four-man tactical squad in favour of just two – a veteran sniper and a greenhorn assault guy – it's a lot closer to a traditional shooter than previous Conflicts. You can switch between your two characters at will and give basic orders (such as go there or kill that), but there isn't much tactical thinking called for. It's easy to arrange invigorating firefights, and more intense than the action norm because you're controlling two guys.

Any sense of reality that earlier Conflict games had is ditched for unabashed Schwarzenegger-style heroics. It's more about the single-handed downing of jet planes than meticulous stealth and flanking manoeuvres. Whoever you're not currently controlling is able to take care of himself, so there's mercifully little rushing around and putting yourself in danger to help your partner out. This isn't so true in the occasional stealth missions, where you need to switch arduously between both characters – otherwise, the other guy will calmly stride into plain sight.

Far more amusing are the gradual weapon upgrades. Each completed mission doles out new toys, such as an underslung grenade launcher for the machine gun or a remote camera for the sniper rifle. It's a neat way of becoming more powerful without



▲ Controlling two guys makes Conflict a challenging shooter

awkwardly picking up a giant rocket launcher off someone's corpse. Also smart is the optional mission order. You can tackle most levels in an order of your choosing, although you'll find some are tricky if you've skipped over certain others.

Unfortunately, the buddy movie element doesn't work. Dialogue and voice acting seem woefully cheap. Gags clunk, and presumably tongue-in-cheek moments of male bonding are substandard. For a game that's based so heavily on character, this is a serious failing.

The roughness extends to the game's design. The levels are oppressively linear and often distractingly sparse. Similarly, the plot is a vague anti-terrorist thing that's little more than a politically insensitive excuse to tour every insurgent hotspot on the globe.

None of Denied Ops' problems is insurmountable to your enjoyment, but to be released so soon after Call of Duty 4 and Crysis is unfortunate timing. It feels dated, and its production values pale against its big-budget rivals. Still, it's a quiet time for shooters right now and this may scratch a trigger-happy itch or two.

Alec Meer

SUMMARY

- ✓ Straightforward action
- ✓ Two-man system works well
- ✗ Feels a little crude

FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER Requires Windows XP/Vista, 2GHz processor, 1GB RAM, 128MB graphics card, 7GB disk space
PART CODE B0011IV7CK
DETAILS www.conflict.com

Top 5 games

1. The Orange Box

£27 inc VAT ★★★★★



This great-value omnibus contains the excellent Half-Life 2 plus Episodes 1 and 2. There's also a mind-bending puzzle game, Portal, and the stylish Team Fortress 2.

SUPPLIER www.game.co.uk DETAILS www.valvesoftware.com FULL REVIEW Feb 2008



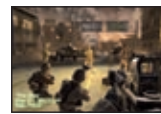
2. Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

£30 inc VAT ★★★★★



This first-person shooter's short campaign mode is intense and action packed, while the multiplayer mode grabs your attention with unlockable weapons and skills.

SUPPLIER www.play.com DETAILS www.charlieoscardelta.com FULL REVIEW Feb 2008



3. Crysis

£27 inc VAT ★★★★★



Crysis gives you plenty of choice in how to approach your enemy and how to defeat them. However its stunning graphics will leave all but the most powerful PCs struggling.

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk DETAILS www.ea.com/crysis FULL REVIEW Feb 2008



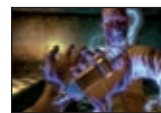
4. BioShock

£18 inc VAT ★★★★★



BioShock successfully blends first-person shooting with RPG-style character upgrades. It's set in an undersea city that's both terrible and beautiful to behold.

SUPPLIER www.game.co.uk DETAILS www.cultofrapture.com FULL REVIEW Dec 2007



5. Lord of the Rings: Shadows of Angmar

£10 + £9 a month inc VAT ★★★★★



This online role-playing game lets you immerse yourself in Tolkien's Middle Earth. The game's detail is truly stunning, it's easy to get into and the combat is excellent.

SUPPLIER www.asda-entertainment.co.uk DETAILS www.lotro.com FULL REVIEW Sep 2007





▲ Build a sprawling Roman city and tend to your citizens' needs in Imperium Romanum

KALYPSO MEDIA Imperium Romanum

★★★★★

£25 inc VAT

From www.play.com

The Roman Empire has provided video gaming with more than its fair share of material over the years, but few Roman-themed titles have been as entertaining and accomplished as this top-quality city-management offering.

The premise is simple: build and manage a Roman city. You must ensure that it meets the diverse requirements of your burgeoning population by constructing houses, farms, shops, trade routes, barracks and a wide variety of entertainment venues. You can either choose to build a city from scratch or manage Rome itself – a sprawling metropolis packed with disgruntled citizens, each with their own demands. Watching your AI-controlled subjects go about their daily business is a real pleasure. Citizens plough fields, workers carry raw materials to construction sites and baying masses enjoy the brutality of the Colosseum.

As well as managing your city, you're also responsible for its expansion and protection. After recruiting swordsmen, archers and cavalry units, you must sally out of the confines of your walls and try to wipe out nearby barbarian tribes before they can amass a force large enough to besiege your city. However, while the combat is a welcome distraction, its lack of tactical depth makes it feel lacklustre.

Imperium Romanum is so addictive that it'll suck up endless hours of your spare time, but it's educational, too, providing you with regular nuggets of historical information about the Roman Empire. If this sounds like your idea of hell, fear not. These passages can be skipped easily, allowing you to concentrate on managing your city.

While it is not without its faults, Imperium Romanum is still one of the best historical management games of recent years. It may not be a champion, but it'll certainly get a thumbs-up from any fan of the genre.

Alex Lee

SUMMARY

- ✓ Hugely addictive
- ✓ Excellent management elements
- ✗ Combat lacks depth

CITY MANAGEMENT GAME Requires Windows 98/Me/2000/XP/Vista, 1.7GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 128MB graphics card, 1GB disk space PART CODE B0012MGL4E DETAILS www.imperium-game.com



▲ High scores are extremely important when you are playing The Club

SEGA The Club

★★★★★

£18 inc VAT

From www.play.com

This action game's a little different from the norm. Like an arcade game of yesteryear, The Club is all about the high scores. There's no storyline to speak of, and no purpose other than to gun down legions of pop-up men as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Clearly, it's an acquired taste. The challenge is one of reflex and memory, not tactics or puzzle-solving. Each successful kill increases a score multiplier. If you don't kill again within the next few seconds, that multiplier will fade away. So it's a matter of running the few, and relentlessly similar, levels again and again until you've learned them. To appear high on the online leaderboard, you will need to have memorised every dead end, every corner a baddie will appear from, every one of the hidden icons that grant bonus points. It's a racing game in disguise, and a constant quest for self-improvement.

If you don't have any interest in appearing on that leaderboard, The Club isn't for you. There's no satisfaction from merely completing a course. You must either practise constantly to maintain your place on those boards, or simply not bother. This game requires serious concentration, bordering on obsession.

The Club would be more accessible if it didn't play things so depressingly straight. It's a ridiculous idea for a game, but it doesn't ever laugh about it. It's just grim men, with grim faces. Also disappointing is the multiplayer mode. The legions of computer-controlled men aren't available when you're playing online. Instead, it's you versus seven human players in a few unadventurous death-match modes.

Still, it's a brave refocusing on what's at the heart of an action game: shooting accurately. Where other games get bogged down in overwritten storylines, this one is built for unceasing adrenaline. It's not for everyone, but if you're interested in constantly challenging yourself, there's nothing else quite like it.

Alec Meer

SUMMARY

- ✓ A novel take on shooting games
- ✓ Will appeal to high-score junkies
- ✗ Not for casual gamers

THIRD-PERSON SHOOTER Requires Windows XP/Vista, 2GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 128MB graphics card, 2.2GB disk space PART CODE B000VQVO76 DETAILS www.bizarrecreations.com/games/the_club



▲ It all looks good from this far up, and you can even kidnap cows for profit in Earth Assault

SEGA Universe at War: Earth Assault

★★★★★

£25 inc VAT

From www.amazon.co.uk

Universe at War: Earth Assault could have been one of the all-time great strategy games, with over-the-top alien races warring over a besieged Earth. The concept promised much: cow abductions and giant robots fighting giant tripods. It's a sad surprise to find that this real-time strategy title is plain and all too familiar.

Of the three races, only the cheerful alien invasion movie stereotypes known collectively as the Hierarchy really entertain or innovate. They're based around enormous walkers, which are both the crux of their attack and the source of new units. Rather than building a base, they are a collection of mobile war factories, hugely customisable with an array of turrets, upgrades and armour. The walkers are spectacular to behold, so huge and heavily armoured that they take an age to fell. If it were not for them, this game wouldn't deserve its grandiose title.

The other two playable races are more typical but have interesting twists, such as the Novus's ability to teleport about the battlefield. They're fun, but they are not as wild as the Hierarchy, which is disappointing. The same is true of the plot, which takes a very silly idea far too seriously and ends up mired in rote sci-fi nonsense. The rather spartan graphics don't help, either. The game's good-looking on a large scale when the screen's full of explosions and death rays, but close-up investigation of the units show them to be bland and blocky.

Just like Conflict: Denied Ops (reviewed opposite), Earth Assault is a victim of circumstance. The three races are distinct enough to give the game decent multiplayer legs, but it's not that great for a single player. There are too many incredible real-time strategy games around at the moment, such as Supreme Commander, and games that are merely quite good simply don't cut it.

Alec Meer

SUMMARY

- ✓ Distinct factions
- ✓ Kidnapping cows for fun and profit
- ✗ A little too ordinary

REAL-TIME STRATEGY Requires Windows XP/Vista, 2GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 128MB graphics card, 8GB disk space PART CODE B000V5AWSE DETAILS <http://universeatwargame.com>